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Exercise - Getting Started

By: James L. Holly, MD

“Getting started.” There are two maxims by which I have lived:

1. There are many things which I have started which I did not finish, but I have never finished anything which I did not start.
2. I would rather fail a thousand times trying than succeed once doing nothing.

These are not unlike the more eloquent words of President Theodore Roosevelt, who said:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually try to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

Exercising for health is like that. It is possible to fail, but failing is far superior to never trying. The good news about failure is that you can always start over. The bad news about never starting is that you can never change.

How do you “get started” exercising, particularly when you don’t really enjoy physical activity? Here are some principles:

1. Exercising for health is not a competitive sport. It doesn’t matter what others are doing, the only thing which can help you is what you are doing and the only thing which can hurt you is what you are not doing. Don’t worry about the “jocks.” Enjoy the benefits of your efforts without regard to what others are doing.
2. Exercising for health proves the axiom – a little goes a long way. Walking a mile a day, slowly, regularly will provide you health benefits, not to speak of the psychological benefits. You were design to be mobile – if you ever give up your mobility, you will lose far more than your ability to get around.
3. You didn’t get where you are overnight and you will not get where you want to be overnight. Start slowly with resolution to continue and build gradually. There is little or no benefit to starting with a vigorous, painful exercise program which lasts for a day. Remember the tortoise and the hare. Slow, gradual progress will get you there before the fast start which is not sustained.
4. People are social creatures. You are more likely to sustain an exercise program if you do it with others. However, be cautious about becoming dependent upon others because if they don’t continue you must.

Where do you start? One good place is with your health care provider. He/she should be able to give you an exercise prescription which directs you to the amount of aerobic exercise required to achieve various levels of fitness. That exercise prescription should include instructions for stretching and strengthening as well as walking, jogging, cycling or swimming. If you have any shortness of breath at all with exertion, a cardiopulmonary physiology test would be beneficial to you. It would let you know if it safe for you to exercise and it will give you an objective starting point so over time you can compare your progress. If your clinic does not provide this testing, your healthcare provider can refer you to a pulmonologist who can perform this testing for you.

Once you have your prescription and you know your current state of health, you re ready to start – well almost. One thing you will need is good equipment -- I did not say expensive. You will need good footwear both to protect your feet and to prevent stumbling or falling.

Some considerations:

1. If you are sixty or older, and if you have never walked or jogged on a treadmill, it is best to avoid the use of treadmills as falls can be painful and dangerous.
2. Make sure you exercise in a place where you are not subject to automobile traffic which could serve into you.
3. Make sure you stay well hydrated. Drink before, during and after your exercise.
4. Dress appropriately. If the weather is cold, cover up. If it is hot, cover your head and protect your skin from the harmful sun rays.
5. If it is hot and humid, be careful about heat exhaustion or heat stroke. Avoid the extreme heat of summer days between 10:00 AM and 3:00 PM.
6. You want to extend your body's capabilities without injuring yourself. Don't increase your speed, distance, weights, and angle of stretching too rapidly. The only thing worse than failing to sustain your exercise is being committed to doing it and being unable to because of an avoidable injury.
7. You are NEVER too old to start exercising.

The American Council on Exercise (ACE) surveyed 3,000 certified fitness professionals and asked them what are the biggest mistakes they see people making in the gym-- but you don't have to work out in a gym to make some of these top ten fitness fumbles:

- **Not stretching enough.** It's always a good idea to stretch for a few minutes prior to exercise concentrating on the muscles that will be used during the fitness activity. Most importantly, spending time stretching after a workout for about 8- 10 minutes, while your muscles are still warm and pliable, will reap major benefits. Muscles that are flexible are far less likely to be injured than tight ones.
- **Not warming up prior to aerobic activity.** Stretching is just part of the warm-up equation. Your entire body needs to be gradually warmed up to prepare it for the added demands of aerobic training. During warm-up your body re-routes blood to your extremities to efficiently deliver oxygen to the working muscles, your heart- rate

gradually elevates so it can meet your increased need for oxygen, and your muscles gradually prepare to help you hit your peak stride. So, start out slowly for the first few minutes, your workout will be much more effective.

- **Not cooling down after any type of workout.** Just as your body needs a warm-up it also needs a cool-down. Take some time to gradually let your heart-rate lower. Stopping aerobic activity abruptly can cause a number of problems such as blood pooling in your lower extremities or making you feel light-headed. Now is also a prime time to get in a good stretch that will provide you with lasting flexibility.
- **Lifting too much weight.** This is a sure-fire way to an injury and a painful one at that! Too much weight will contribute to poor form when lifting and create injury to other areas of the body in addition to the muscle you're targeting. Know your limits. The most effective workout is gradual progressive resistance training.
- **Jerking while lifting weights.** Lifting too much weight can contribute to jerking. The best way to strength train a muscle is by using slow, controlled movement. If you're jerking your weights you're inviting injury, especially to your back muscles.
- **Exercising too intensely.** The days of "no pain, no gain" are gone! If you're looking for effective weight loss, longer periods of moderately intense workouts are most effective. Short periods of high intensity training are fine when integrated into a circuit training workout or when used for athletic training. But for the average fitness enthusiast, too much intensity will only lead to soreness and burnout.
- **Not exercising intensely enough.** If you're looking for results you need to put effort into your fitness program. You don't want to overdo it, but you do want to get your heart elevated into its target training zone.
- **Leaning heavily on the Stairmaster.** If you find yourself leaning on the Stairmaster you're cheating yourself out of an effective workout. Focus on setting the intensity level at the point where you can stand up straight while lightly resting your hands on the rails for balance. If you want to really improve your balance and workout, practice taking your hands off the rails and moving your arms as though you're actually going upstairs.
- **Not drinking enough water.** Contrary to most sports drink advertising, unless you work out for more than two hours per day, water will fill all your fluid needs. Be sure to drink at least 64 ounces of water per day, that's eight 8 ounce glasses.
- **Consuming energy bars and sports drinks during moderate workouts.** Most fitness professionals agree that unless you're exercising for more than 2 hours a day, energy bars and sports drinks aren't necessary. Unfortunately, high-energy generally means high-calorie when it comes to these products. Sticking to a healthy, well rounded eating plan and drinking plenty of water should meet most exercisers needs.

Next week, we will continue with how to get started with an exercise program which you can sustain. Remember, it is your life and it is your health.